

PARKER SYDNOR LOG CABIN  
Off of Wilbourne Road  
Clarksville  
Mecklenburg County  
Virginia

HABS VA-1419  
VA-1419

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
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## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### PARKER SYDNOR LOG CABIN

HABS No. VA-1419

Location: Clarksville, Mecklenburg County, Virginia.

The Parker Sydnor Log Cabin's location is restricted.

Significance: The Patrick Robert "Parker" Sydnor Log Cabin is primarily associated with the experience of Reconstruction in Mecklenburg County that lasted from 1865 through 1890. It served as a "home place" for several generations of African-Americans beginning in the post-bellum era and so has become a symbol of the economic advances made by African-American families in the aftermath of slavery. The property was sold out of the holdings of the Skipwith family at nearby Prestwoud Plantation in 1884; four years later Lovice (Vicey) Skipwith, a former slave at Prestwoud, bought it. The cabin represents the experience of many African-American families who, after emancipation, established themselves as tenant farmers on the plantations where they had once worked as slaves or as small farmers on plots of land adjacent to those plantations. The log cabin is still owned by descendants of Patrick Robert "Parker" Sydnor (ca. 1854-1950), a carver of tombstones in the area of Cabin Point, with whom the building is historically tied.

Description: The cabin is one and one-half stories in height and is covered by a side-gable roof. The sill plates rest directly on the low, random-rubble fieldstone foundation while the walls are made of horizontal log construction secured at the corners by v-notches and sealed with chinking. The gables are clad with weatherboards; the weatherboard cladding was removed in the mid-twentieth century. There is an exterior end chimney, made of complex masonry (brick and stone), on the west elevation. The south (front) elevation is defined by two bays – one window and one door opening – while the east elevation is punctuated by one sash window glazed with six-over-six lights on the first floor and another, glazed with four-over-four lights, in the gable. The north (rear) elevation contains another portal, here a centrally-located doorway. The south front entrance has a plank door, and the rear a six-paneled door. The window and door openings are fitted with simple, wood frames made of flat boards that appear to date to the mid-twentieth century. Likely these were installed when the weatherboard cladding was removed. Wire nails are visible in the gable window frame.

Inside, the cabin has a one-room plan with a loft above. The firebox is brick masonry, as is the mantle. The ladder stair to the loft is positioned on the east end of the room; elements of the stair likely were replaced in the mid-twentieth century, but remain true in scale and finish to the original. The first-floor walls are sheathed in sheetrock, while those of the loft are left unfinished. Above the knee walls, the space is open to the rafters. The metal roofing is supported by common rafters resting on the wall plate and by large planks resting on the rafters themselves.

Other buildings on the property include a one-story storage building, poultry house, and outhouse that all date to around 1930 when Parker Sydnor lived in the cabin.

History: The land on which the cabin now stands was purchased from the Skipwith family in 1884 by J.J. Crowder and his wife Margaret; the Crowder family is known to have been in Mecklenburg County by 1818. Of those forty acres, Vacey Skipwith who had been a slave on the nearby Prestwoud Plantation purchased six and a half. After 1865, Skipwith became a wage laborer at Prestwoud and census records noted her skills as a cook. She, and other African-Virginians, lived along Cox Road and helped sustain the community at Cabin Point as a neighborhood of freed blacks. Sydnor would eventually buy the property from Skipwith, although the family long had occupied the cabin. The parcel remains in the family's custody today.

Parker Sydnor was well known for his stone carving business, particularly his work with tombstones that connected him to a larger network of African-Virginians through church congregations and their graveyards in Halifax and Mecklenburg counties. Two cemeteries with known examples of his work are those at St. Matthew Baptist Church in Clarksville and in Spanish Grove in Scottsburg. In addition to his craftsmanship, Sydnor managed to learn to read and to write, and the tombstones he fashioned exhibit his hard-won literacy at a time when educational opportunities for former slaves were extremely limited. Literacy, craftsmanship and entrepreneurial endeavors, and property ownership combined attest to Sydnor's – and many like him – claim to citizenship and equal rights during a period when persistent prejudices reversed the initial successes of Reconstruction (such as the rescindment of property transfers by Johnson in 1866) in what became the Jim Crow South.

Sydnor's work as a mason is also representative of the value of enslaved men and women with carpentry, stone carving, and other trade skills to the plantation economy in the antebellum period. Their skills made them marketable to the plantation owners, who benefited from their labor, and after 1865, these same skills helped the individuals earn a living for themselves. The stonework of the cabin's chimney, with its cut stone block base and brick laid in American bond for the stack, is part of the vernacular building tradition of Mecklenburg County as shown by the long-standing presence of masons like Sydnor in the area and by what remains of their and their predecessors' work. The house at Prestwoud Plantation is perhaps the best-known example, along with the finely constructed walls and entrance to the grounds. Moreover, Skipwith family papers collaborate the material evidence seen in the house and walls; records show the family hired slave masons at various times between 1794 and 1797.

Sources: Dr. Angelita D. Reyes, "Patrick Robert Sydnor Log Cabin," Nomination 2007, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service.